

Penn Alto Hotel  
1120-30 13th Avenue  
Intown Neighborhood  
Altoona  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5515

HABS  
PA  
7-ALTO  
III-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PENN ALTO HOTEL

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PA,  
7-ALTO,  
III -  
HABS No. PA-5515

Location: 1120-30 13th Ave. (northeast corner of 12th Street and 13th Avenue), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Penn Alto Associates, Limited Partnership, c/o Maurice and Mary Lou Lawruk, 319A East Plank Road, Altoona, Pa, 16602.

Present Use: The Penn Alto is currently a residential hotel. It is in the process of being converted into federally subsidized, middle-income housing.

Significance: Perhaps better than any other single building in downtown Altoona, the Penn Alto Hotel symbolizes the civic spirit of the 1920s. Initiated by the newly formed chamber of commerce and financed by private subscriptions, the hotel represented an attempt to bring convention business to downtown Altoona. The chamber saw a need to diversify the city's economy, which until then was dominated by a single industry--the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Stylistically the nine-story building is an example of national trends rather than strictly local ones. Though local in inspiration, the project was undertaken by the George H. Stevens Company of Chicago, an early design-building firm, and consequently resembles many other large hotels in such geographically diverse places as Cleveland and Des Moines.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1920-21. Ground was broken January 20, 1920; it was dedicated September 8, 1921. An addition in 1928 added 109 rooms to the 13th Avenue side.
2. Architect and builder: George H. Stevens and Company of Chicago and New York, an early design-build firm, was responsible for designing the hotel. The Stevens firm specialized in hotels, performing the planning and design functions as well as supervising the construction. In addition, Stevens and Company selected and purchased all of the hotel's furnishings. O. C. Gross of Chicago served as the project architect for Stevens and Company. F. G. Rutan, also of Stevens and Company, supervised the construction. The 1928 addition was designed by Gloeker of Pittsburgh.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1989, the hotel was deeded to its current owners.
4. Sub-contractors, suppliers:  
  
Brick: 80,000 facing brick and 300,000 common brick were supplied by Altoona Brick Company.  
Crushed stone: American Lime and Stone Company.  
Cement and plaster: Standard Supply and Equipment Co., Altoona.  
Marble, crushed stone: Appalachian Mining Co., Knoxville, Tenn.  
Windows and sash: Cottage Planing Co. of Everett, Pa.  
Plate glass: W. H. Goodfellow's Sons, Altoona.  
Electric fixtures: Supplied by Central Electric Co., Chicago.  
Plumbing: Installed by Elway and Chamberlain, Altoona.

Hardware: Russell and Irwin, Bridgeport, Conn.  
Boilers: Erie City Iron Works, Erie, Pa.  
Elevators: Otis Elevator Company furnished one freight and two passenger elevators.  
Roof: Union Roofing Co.  
(Minutes, Blair Hotel Company Building Committee, 1919-20. Penn Alto Hotel Archives).

5. Original plans and construction: Early in the planning stages, the members of the hotel's building committee ran a photograph of the proposed hotel in the Altoona Tribune. In this early version, the first-floor windows had elliptically arched transoms, rather than round-arched openings, and a hipped roof with terra cotta tile covered the building. The newspaper described the proposed design as "Spanish Renaissance" in style. By January 1920, however, the present--and less expensive--design had been finalized. ("New Penn-Alto Will Dominate City Sky-Line," Altoona Tribune [November 21, 1919]. Minutes, Blair Hotel Company Building Committee)

The Penn Alto Hotel was designed to accommodate three grand public rooms, a coffee shop, and two commercial stores on the first and mezzanine floors, and 197 guest rooms on floors three through nine. The limestone face on the first and second stories delineated the public space; large round-arched windows indicated the lobby and dining rooms. Marquees on both street facades, since removed, marked the two main entrances.

The hotel was originally an L-shaped building above the second-story level, with wings measuring 100' (13th Avenue) and 115' (12th Street) in length. On floors three through nine, corridors ran down the center of each wing, lit by a window at each end. The corridors were 6' wide with approximately twenty-eight rooms on each floor. The cost of construction was \$1.25 million, including \$250,000 for the furnishings.

6. Alterations and additions: In 1928 a nine-story addition added 109 rooms to the 13th Avenue side, changing the L-plan hotel into a U-shaped plan.

In the 1950s, a storage annex was added to the north side of the building. Although the exterior of the hotel remains virtually unchanged, the first and mezzanine floors have recently been altered with dropped ceilings and new materials.

B. Historical Context:

In 1918, the newly formed chamber of commerce included in its program the goal of obtaining a new hotel for Altoona, a large, "modern" hotel that would attract convention business. The Blair Hotel Company was formed to undertake this project, and private subscriptions were solicited from the citizens of Altoona.

During 1919-20, the chamber of commerce published a series of promotional advertisements in the Tribune and Mirror, encouraging "the working man" as well as the "business man" to invest in bonds to finance the hotel's construction. Some of these ads appealed to the lofty ideals of cooperation and loyalty, civic pride and civic duty; others emphasized the "logic" of a sound business investment. Still others

attempted to demonstrate that Altoona's future rested in the hands of its citizens (as opposed to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company--although this was never stated explicitly). These ads invoked words of wisdom from Ben Franklin: "Citizens of Altoona, we must all hang together, or assuredly, we will hang separately."<sup>1</sup>

Lists of original subscribers in the hotel's archives reveal that local businessmen and high-ranking, local bank officials were among the project's primary investors: I. C. Mishler, proprietor of the Mishler Theatre, the Silverman brothers, and Jacob Brett were listed among the largest contributors. However, numerous smaller investors also helped finance the building campaign. By 1920, 900 stockholders had invested the requisite \$1.25 million, and on September 8, 1921, the hotel opened to the public.

The Blair Hotel Company, representing the stockholders, owned the building and the land; the Altoona Hotel Company managed the facility. After lengthy negotiations, David Olmstead of Cleveland agreed to serve as the hotel's first manager, and as president of the Altoona Hotel Company. In 1925, the Blair Hotel Company took over the hotel's operation. In 1933, the Penn Alto was leased to American Hotels Corporation. Again under new management, it no longer functions as a guest hotel. The Penn Alto is currently being converted into apartments for federally subsidized housing.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The largest building in the commercial district, the Penn Alto Hotel is a nine-story building erected in two stages over a ten-year period. Its vertical, tripartite divisions--with zones marking the public spaces, guest rooms, and penthouse suites--make it fairly typical of the hotels built throughout the United States in the 1910s and 1920s by early build-design firms such as the George H. Stevens Company.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The hotel measures approximately 140' (sixteen-bay front on 13th Avenue) x 115' (fourteen bays on 12th Street) and rises nine stories. It is serviced from the rear by a 15' wide public alley.
2. Walls: The first and second stories are faced with white, Bedford limestone. Floors three through nine have red brick walls with black mortar joints. There are subtle, vertical seams in the masonry where the 1928 addition was joined to the 13th Avenue and alley facades.
3. Structural systems, framing: Steel frame clad in red tapestry brick over hollow tile.
4. Openings:

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<sup>1</sup>These advertisements are collected in five scrapbooks of articles relating to the construction of the hotel. Penn Alto Hotel Archives, Altoona.

- a. Doorways and doors: There are two main entrances, the first located in the fourth bay of the 12th Street facade, and the second located in the third bay of the 13th Avenue facade. They both have new glass and aluminum double doors.
  - b. Windows: Large, round-arched windows on the two facades indicate the lobby and dining room. Floors three through nine have simple, flat-arched windows, one pair in each structural bay. These have one-over-one-light, double-hung sash. The ninth-floor windows are round-arched, with pronounced limestone keystones. The third and ninth floor windows are set in limestone surrounds.
5. Roof:
- a. Shape: Flat roof.
  - b. Cornice: There is a copper cornice on the two street facades with a 4' return.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plans:
- a. Basement: In addition to a barber shop, the basement of the hotel had a billiard room, valet room, store rooms, boiler and engine rooms, and main laundry. A press release described the basement as "one of the best ventilated and planned basements found anywhere." ("The Penn Alto Hotel," undated typescript for release to the press, Penn Alto Archives)
  - b. First: The first floor had two grand public rooms, the Roberdeau Room (dining room) to the left of the 12th Street entrance, and the lobby on the 13th Avenue side. The lobby measured 70' square and had a ceiling height of 18'. There were four columns, 24" in diameter, with a black and gold marble faces, and antique gold caps. These columns are still extant. To the rear of the lobby was the main desk, which had a marble counter. Opposite the desk, at a distance of 15', was a cigar and magazine stand. ("First Floor Index to Hotel's Beauty," undated newspaper clipping in the Penn Alto Archives)
  - c. Mezzanine: The mezzanine, which encircled the main lobby on three sides, contained the grand ballroom, called the Logan Room, which measured 42' x 90'; a smaller banquet room, called the Oneida Room, which measured 22' x 40'; and a lounge. A state suite, consisting of four rooms, originally occupied the corner space on the mezzanine floor, overlooking 12th Street. The living room, which measures 20' x 20', was entered through the foyer. There were bedrooms on either side of the living room, and a third bedroom located off the corridor. The mezzanine has recently been sealed in with opaque glass panels.
  - d. Third-Ninth: Typical floors consist of U-shaped corridors with guest rooms on each side. Each floor was also equipped with a linen room and store room.

2. Stairways: A marble stairway opposite the 12th Street entrance leads to the mezzanine. At either end of the building is a concrete stairway which serves as an inside fire escape leading to the ground floor.
3. Flooring: The entire basement had a concrete floor, except for the barber shop and restrooms, which were covered with multi-colored tile. On the first level, the lobby had a gray Tennessee marble floor, "ground and polished to a perfectly smooth finish"; the coffee shop on 13th Avenue had a tile floor. The lobby also had specially designed Imperial Wilton rugs in Chinese blue with medallions in old ivory and two tones of blue. The Roberdeau Room and all of the guest rooms had cement floors prepared for carpet. In the guest rooms, there were black and taupe Wilton Velvet carpets. Tile floors were installed in all of the guest room bathrooms. All of the corridors were carpeted with black and white rugs "of neat design with borders to match;" these have been replaced several times. ("The Penn Alto Hotel," undated typescript for release to the press, Penn Alto Archives)
4. Wall and ceiling finish:
  - a. First floor: The lobby walls had a 4' high panelled mahogany wainscot, with a chocolate marble base, and a plaster ceiling; the wainscoting is longer extant. The dining room was finished in Nile green and had seven decorative murals, an elaborate plaster ceiling, and plaster walls. Both of these areas have been recently remodeled with dropped ceilings and new materials.
  - b. Mezzanine: The grand ballroom, or Logan Room, had "grey ivory panelled walls with antique gold decorative lines." Around the arched windows and doors, the trim was done in hand-decorated panels. The central panel featured a portrait of Chief Logan. The wall hangings were of "old Venetian red silk with antique gold braid trimmings." Silk draw curtains were hung behind the overdrapes to block out sunlight for motion picture showings. The woodwork in the room was finished in "Nile green," to match the upholstered furniture. The state suite was "panelled and finished in Old Ivory, and furnished with Italian damask hangings." The bedrooms of the suite were "specially furnished with one of Widdecomb's best designs." ("Logan Room will be Social Center," undated newspaper clipping, Penn Alto Archives)
  - c. Third-Ninth: The corridors originally had paneled wainscots with tapestry walls and a cove cornice above. Wood trim was in "Old Ivory, stippled and glazed." The hotel rooms were originally papered in "special designs" of Birge wallpapers, produced by William Morris' firm in England. The trim inside the guest rooms was painted warm gray. ("Typical Floors Precisely Alike," undated newspaper clipping, Penn Alto Archives)
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Most doors are of one-panel construction and were originally stained dark walnut. The doors in the two fire escapes are of fireproof kalsomine.

- b. Windows: In the Logan Room, the window openings were originally trimmed with "classic garlands interpreting relief plaster." The window openings in the fire escapes have metal frames.
- 6. Mechanical systems:
  - a. Heating: Vacuum steam system.
  - b. Lighting: Electric.
  - c. Elevators: The hotel was equipped with two 350' per minute passenger and one 250' per minute freight elevators with cast-iron door fronts.
- D. Site: The Penn Alto Hotel is located on the northeast corner of 12th Street and 13th Avenue.

#### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: Blueprints of architectural drawings of several proposed floor plans, dated 1919, and plans of the 1928 addition by Gloeker of Pittsburgh are in the hotel's archives.
- B. Early views:
  - a. The Altoona Area Public Library has a photograph of the partially clad steel frame (ca. 1920) in its local history archives. The tower of the old city hall is just visible to the left in this view.
  - b. Penn Alto Hotel Archives (cited below) also contains a photograph of the building, almost complete, showing projecting rafters for the copper cornice.
  - c. View of the completed hotel from the south. Altoona Tribune (September 8, 1921).
- C. Bibliography:
  - 1. Primary sources: The archive of the Penn Alto Hotel, located in the building, contains a wealth of information on the early history of the hotel. The following items in particular are of architectural and social-historical interest:
    - a. Five scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, 1919-25, documenting the chamber of commerce's campaign to build the hotel. Included are a series of advertisements promoting local investment in the Blair Hotel Company, and the September 7, 1921, edition of the Altoona Mirror, which contains a front-page story and supplement on the opening of the hotel.
    - b. Several files of correspondence with various architectural firms, builders, and suppliers.
    - c. Minutes of the Blair Hotel Company Building Committee, 1919-21, which record the decision-making processes regarding materials, construction, etc.

- d. A file of correspondence on historical matters. Background research on each of the names selected for the hotel's public rooms was conducted by a staff of professional historians.
  - e. Several copies of lists of original subscribers, labelled "confidential--not for publication."
  - f. References to a builders' strike during the hotel's construction, which can be found scattered throughout the correspondence and scrapbooks.
2. Secondary sources:
- Altoona Centennial Booklet: Noteworthy Personages and Historical Events. Altoona: privately printed, 1949.
- Chamber of Commerce, Altoona. Altoona: privately printed, 1925.
- Shank, Andrew. National Register Nomination for the Penn Alto Hotel, draft, March 6, 1984.
- Wolf, George A., ed. Blair County's First Hundred Years: 1846-1946. Altoona: The Mirror Press, 1945.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of HABS historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.